

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 9

THE NEW YORK TIMES
19 November 1977

P- Winfrey, Carey
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SOC 4.01.2 Decent Interval

Random House Took Precautions to Keep Its Publication of Book Secret

By CAREY WINFREY

Random House, which secretly published Frank Snapp's book about the fall of Saigon, was so concerned about possible Government intervention that only a dozen of its 800 New York employees knew about the book and Mr. Snapp never set foot inside the concern's headquarters.

The book, "Decent Interval," was edited in secret.

The author and Random House staff members took elaborate precautions to keep the Central Intelligence Agency from finding out the name of the publishing company for fear that the agency would try to stop its publication.

The C.I.A. was aware that the book was being written. Mr. Snapp had agreed to let it review the manuscript before publication.

In the early spring of 1976, Robert Loomis, a Random House editor, was asked by a friend of his and of Mr. Snapp if he would be interested in reading a manuscript-in-progress about the last days of American-occupied Saigon. A meeting with the author was arranged in a Manhattan restaurant.

After reading the manuscript and in consultation with Robert L. Bernstein, chairman and president of Random

House, Mr. Loomis struck a deal with the mutual friend, who was acting on Mr. Snapp's behalf. It was understood at the time that the book would not be submitted to the C.I.A. for review.

Mr. Snapp takes the position that the agency tried to whitewash its role in the American withdrawal, and that that invalidates his agreement to submit the book to the agency for approval. The publisher contends that as long as its publication violates no law and jeopardizes neither individual agents nor national security, the book should be published.

In 1974, Alfred A. Knopf Inc., a Random House subsidiary, published "The C.I.A. and the Cult of Intelligence," by Victor Marchetti and John Marks, after the manuscript was submitted to the C.I.A. and several deletions were made.

According to Mr. Bernstein, Random House turned down Philip Agee's C.I.A. expose, "Inside the Company," which was subsequently published in England. Mr. Bernstein said yesterday that the Agee book had been rejected because in his view, it did jeopardize the lives of individual agents.

Of "Decent Interval," Mr. Bernstein said, "We're very glad it's out. We believe it's important that the public be informed about the mistakes that were made there, and about the lessons that should have been learned, to prevent our repeating those mistakes."

Throughout the book's editorial incubation, Mr. Snapp met with Mr. Loomis in

various places: city parks, city streets, restaurants and Mr. Loomis's apartment. Mr. Snapp did not visit the Random House headquarters on Third Avenue, in part because he feared being spotted there and in part because of a professional's respect for modern electronic eavesdropping technology.

The body of the book was sent out to be printed in the normal fashion, but the book jacket information, which describes the import of the manuscripts, was typewritten by Mr. Loomis's secretary and incorporated into the jacket design at the last minute by a photo-offset process.

Earlier this week, more than 15,000 copies of the book were sent to 2,000 bookstores around the country, none of which had ordered any. A letter explaining the unsolicited shipments was sent subsequently. Review copies were mailed to reviewers at mid-week.

"We don't welcome having to publish books this way," Mr. Loomis said yesterday, a view that was seconded by Mr. Bernstein.

"What really is happening in publishing," Mr. Bernstein added, "is that as issues get more complicated, more news is being published as books. So that book publishers are starting to face some of the same problems as newspaper and magazine publishers. And I think they find the same distaste for prior restraint as the rest of the American media."

CIA 104 Agee, Philip
Orig: Random House